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Security Council

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Letter dated 23 October 2015 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you the attached letter from the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (see annex).

I would be most grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Matthew **Rycroft**

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Annex to the letter dated 23 October 2015 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

On behalf of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, it is with great alarm that I draw your attention to the dire humanitarian situation inside Syria and the growing toll of the Russian Federation's campaign of indiscriminate military aggression, which has thus far resulted in over 231 civilian casualties. As members of the Security Council prepare for their upcoming briefing on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014), it is critical that Member States condemn Russia's indiscriminate slaughter in the strongest terms, and take the measures necessary to ensure that such atrocities do not go repeated.

On 30 September 2015, Russian Federation forces initiated a campaign of indiscriminate aerial attacks on the opposition-held provinces of north-west Syria. Over the past three weeks, civilians and civilian objects — including bread distribution points, civilian homes, places of worship and displaced peoples camps — have repeatedly been the subject of Russia's indiscriminate aerial attacks. Among Russia's targets have been the provinces of Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, the Damascus countryside, Hama and Deraa, where, in addition to deploying more than 297 air strikes, Russian forces have launched surface-to-surface missiles and cluster munitions.

Contrary to the claims of the Russian Federation, its intervention is not designed to counter terrorist extremist groups like ISIS, but rather to facilitate the Assad regime's war on civilians and eliminate Syria's moderate opposition forces. According to data compiled by Syrian Civil Defence rescue workers, since 30 September 2015 more than 436 Syrian civilians have been killed in Syria, among them 55 women and 63 children. More than half of these civilian deaths are directly attributable to Russian air strikes (see enclosure).

The notion that Russian air strikes are targeting ISIS is a fallacy. To date, just 7 per cent of Russian air strikes have targeted ISIS-held areas. The bulk have targeted areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army. Worse — Russia's air strikes have not merely avoided extremist targets, they have in fact directly benefited ISIS.

Since the onset of Russia's intervention in Syria, ISIS extremists have made some of their most significant territorial gains to date. In Aleppo, ISIS forces have exploited Russian strikes against the moderate opposition, who were combating ISIS, to stage their most important military advance since August 2014. Russia's intervention is a further radicalizing factor on the ground.

Russian air strikes are helping extremism. They are also fuelling mass displacement and the refugee crisis. Tens of thousands of civilians are currently fleeing a joint Syrian regime-Russian offensive in opposition-held areas south of the city of Aleppo. Under the cover of Russian air power and with the support of Iranian militia and Hizbullah terrorists, regime forces are emptying entire villages of their residents, leaving thousands without shelter, food or medical support.

But Aleppo is not the only province to sustain coordinated attacks by Russian and Syrian forces. Rural areas in Homs and Hama and the north coastal province of

Latakia have also sustained joint offensives by Syrian regime and Russian forces. In the south-western districts of Aleppo city and Hama, some 85,000 people have been driven from their homes as a consequence of Russian and Syrian attacks.

Russia's military aggression in Syria is not merely worsening the humanitarian crisis in Syria, it is also violating international humanitarian law. Russian strikes are taken with total disregard for civilians and civilian objects, in direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and Security Council resolution 2139 (2014), which demands that "all parties immediately cease all attacks against civilians, as well as the indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas, including shelling and aerial bombardment, such as the use of barrel bombs, and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering".

Russia's war crimes in Syria must stop. So too must those of the Syrian regime. For that reason, the Syrian National Coalition asks that members of the Security Council take the following steps:

- **Condemn** in the strongest terms Russia's military aggression in Syria, including its indiscriminate aerial bombardment which overwhelmingly affects civilians;
- Direct the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to **monitor Russian violations** of international humanitarian and human rights law and request that the Secretary-General report to the Council on the impact of Russia's aggression in Syria;
- Protect civilians across Syria by enforcing a **no-bombing zone** that will deter future aerial attacks by both the Syrian regime and the Russian Federation. Should the Council fail to take the measures needed, then it is incumbent upon Member States to take the required action.

Indiscriminate aerial bombardment remains the single greatest killer in Syria and the number one threat to Syrian civilians. Stopping indiscriminate aerial bombardment would save lives. It would help stem the refugee crisis. And it would help counter extremism. It would also contribute to the political transition process and provide the leverage needed to bring the Syrian regime to the negotiating table. The Syrian National Coalition remains committed to the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, and we are committed to ensuring that all of our fellow Syrians live in a future Syria that is inclusive, democratic and governed by the rule of law. Civilian protection — not more bombing by the Russian Federation — is the best and most effective way to achieve this goal.

(*Signed*) Najib **Ghadbian**
Special Representative to the United Nations
National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

Enclosure

Humanitarian impact of Russian air strikes in Syria, 30 September to 17 October 2015

(*Source*: Syrian Civil Defence)

- Russia conducted **297 air strikes** across north-west Syria, in Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, the Damascus countryside, Hama and Deraa.
- **231 civilian deaths** due to Russian air strikes in Syria, including 38 women, 34 children and 3 Syrian Civil Defence ("White Helmets") rescue workers.
- Russian air strikes accounted for **53 per cent of all civilian deaths** in Syria from 30 September to 17 October.
- Only **7 per cent** of Russian air strikes have targeted ISIS.
- Since the onset of Russian air strikes, **ISIS has staged significant advances**, including in Aleppo.
- As many as **40,000 people** fled northern rural Hama in Syria after Russian and regime forces launched a co-offensive in opposition-held areas.
- Russian air strikes have preponderantly targeted **civilian objects**, including civilian homes, bread distribution points, camps for internally displaced persons, farms and fields.